

IS MR. KURTZ STILL ALIVE? JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND POPULAR CULTURE

Katarzyna Koćma

The Jagiellonian University, Cracow

Abstract: Joseph Conrad's artistic legacy is of vital importance not only to those involved in the creation of 'high' literature and culture, but also to the creators of pop culture, including writers of popular fiction. In this paper, I discuss the influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its impact on films, theatre, music, video games and – above all else – literature. In particular, I examine different realizations of the so-called transtextual relations that exist between *Heart of Darkness* on the one hand and science fiction and fantasy novels such as *Heart of Darkness* by Paul Lawrence or *Headhunter* by Timothy Findley on the other. The main section of the paper is devoted to a discussion of Robert Silverberg's *Downward to the Earth*, which would seem to be the best example of such a transposition. In each case, the connections between both literary works are complex, especially as far as the titles, characters and the represented world are concerned. In my conclusion, I show how Robert Silverberg's transposition of Joseph Conrad's novella has changed both texts and why Conrad is so important for popular fiction.

Keywords: intertextuality, transposition, popular culture, popular fiction, science fiction

1. *HEART OF DARKNESS* IN (POP) CULTURE

Few indeed are those readers who – seeing or hearing the name of Conrad – automatically associate his work with certain practices of popular culture. This is quite understandable, of course, given Conrad's stature in the literary world and the fact that his novels and stories – which are often set books in schools and universities all over the world – have been translated into many languages and are regarded as masterpieces by critics and scholars alike. However, Conrad enthusiasts are also to be found in the non-academic world among writers, poets, stage directors, film directors and even creators of television serials and video games. Almost imperceptibly, Conrad has become an element of popular culture, albeit in a modified and simplified form. Scores of films, television serials and games have been based on Conrad's works¹ – and above all on *Heart of Darkness*. Imitators and enthusiasts of this novella have made use of its motifs,

¹ The webpage <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0175676/> lists 73 such items (accessed: 01/05/2015).

characters, subject matter and title in all manner of cultural texts. Sometimes it is just the title that is mentioned or alluded to, as in John Buchan's novel *Prester John* (1910), in which one of the characters says: "Last night I had looked into the heart of darkness, and the sight had terrified me."² a novel written by David Drake bears the title *In the Heart of Darkness*. In Christopher Walken's novel *The Rundown* (2003), the character Hatcher – who has become a slave in the Amazon jungle – declares: "I'm in the heart of darkness." The phrase "the darkness of man's heart" appears in *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, while the protagonist of Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1966) echoes Kurtz's exclamation: "Horror, horror!"

Some writers not only echo phrases that are to be found in the novella, but also make use of its thematic threads, a case in point being H.M. Tomlinson's *The Sea and The Jungle* (1912). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has also inspired *The Beach* by Alex Garland and *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. Clear allusions to it are to be found in John Kennedy Toole's *In a Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), which explores the problem of a contemporary version of American slavery and in which one of the exploited black characters says: "Perhaps I likened myself to Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* when, far from the trading company offices in Europe, he was faced with the ultimate horror." Toole also uses the terms "Inner", "Central" and "Outer Station".

Somewhat more distant echoes of Conrad's novella are to be found in books such as Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Dream of the Celt* (2010) – a biography of Roger Casement set in the Congo – or Wojciech Scelina's *Ostatni lot nad Kongo (Last Flight over the Congo)* – (2010), which explores the issue of racism in the Congo in Conrad's day. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1959) for its part is seen as a polemical reply to *Heart of Darkness*.

There are also novels in which Kurtz or Marlow themselves – having been taken out of their original context – are elements of a new work of literature. In Paul Lawrence's *Heart of Darkness*, they journey through a metaphorical heart of darkness – the London plague epidemic of 1665. In Timothy Findley's novel *Headhunter* (1998), a certain schizophrenic frees Kurtz from Conrad's book and then finds himself obliged to find his antagonist Marlow. In this novel, both characters are psychiatrists and the action takes place in a post-apocalyptic Toronto. In 2008 Catherine Anyango and David Zane Mairowitz re-created *Heart of Darkness* as a so-called graphic novel.

There have been famous radio and film adaptations of Conrad's African novella. In 1938, Orson Welles made it into a radio play in cooperation with the Mercury Theater. Two years later, he began work on a film adaptation which he was unable to complete. In the 1940s, he created a radio adaptation with Brian Aherne as Marlow in cooperation with the Lux Radio Theater and in 1943 he made yet another radio adaptation entitled *This is My Best*. In 1958, episode 3.7 of the *Playhouse 90* serial was an American adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. In 1989, J. F. Lawton's screenplay

² Most of the examples of Conrad's presence in popular culture are taken from the following webpages: http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Heart_of_Darkness; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart_of_Darkness_%28disambiguation%29 (accessed: 01/05/2015).

for the film *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death* was based on motifs taken from Conrad's novella. In this version, Kurtz is a female author who lives in the Amazon jungle. She dies uttering the characteristic words: "The horror! The horror ... of Letterman!". The plot of *Star Trek: Insurrection* (1989) was also based on *Heart of Darkness*.

The best known film adaptation has been Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The atmosphere of this version is – as in the novella – that of a torpid nightmare, notwithstanding the fact that the action takes place during the Vietnam War. Nicolas Roeg's fairly accurate adaptation (with Tim Roth as Marlow and John Malkovich as Kurtz) has been less of a success, however. Interestingly, a further film adaptation is in the offing, directed by Peter Cornwell and set in outer space (*Apocalypse 2388*). In this new sci-fi version, Kurtz is a famous space explorer who has been sent to a distant planet that could become a new home for human beings. As contact with him has been lost, Marlow is sent to find him.

Heart of Darkness has also been adapted for the stage. In 1991, the Australian playwright Larry Buttrose put on a play entitled *Kurtz* (in Sidney), while in 2011 the novella was adapted as a radio play by the Vision Australia Radio Network.

Certain episodes of popular TV series (and fantasy series in particular) – *The Miami Voice*, *Once Upon a Time* and *The Vampire Diaries* – have also been entitled *Heart of Darkness*. A pornographic film made in 2003 with Raven Touchstone (Penny Antine) as the screenwriter also bears the title of Conrad's novella. And, of course, there have been (computer) games based on the book in varying degrees. A 1998, a platformer video game was entitled *Heart of Darkness*, while elements of the novella are present in *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain*, *Far Cry 2* (one level) and *Victoria II* (one extension). In a video game adaptation entitled *Spec Ops: The Line*, Kurtz has been replaced by a character called John Konrad. Lastly, we might add that the influence of Conrad's masterpiece has also made itself felt in the world of modern popular music.³

2. ROBERT SILVERBERG'S *DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH* AS A TRANSFORMATION OF CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Although most of the above-mentioned works clearly allude to Conrad's novella and / or play with Conradian conventions, none of these cultural texts has transformed the original in such a strange and profound way as has Silverberg's novel entitled *Downward to the Earth*. Robert Silverberg is an unusual writer, being a liter-

³ One American hip-hop group is called *Heart of Darkness*. The same title has been given to albums made by groups such as Grave Digger, Hoodlum Priest, Burnt By The Sun and Positive Noise – and also to the songs "Wages of Sin", "Picture of Health", "PERE Ubu", "Sparkenhorse" and "Cavalera Conspiracy". In 1987 one of the albums made by the U2 group carried a song which included the words: *And in the world, a heart of darkness, a fire-zone / Where poets speak their heart then bleed for it*. The Iron Maiden metal group had a song entitled "The Edge of Darkness", which is the best known example of a musical allusion to Conrad's novella.

ary connoisseur who has written a great many novels and stories – not all of which are of the highest standard – and who has deliberately chosen not to give the psychology of his characters (or the represented world of his books) the great complexity that is characteristic of ‘high’ literature.⁴ Such has been his fascination with ‘high’ culture that he has chosen to base most of his works on those of other writers, one of these being Conrad. John Nakamura Remy cites the following remark in which Silverberg talks about the way in which Conrad has been a source of inspiration for him:

Conrad is a big influence in my writing – not his style or technique, but his sense of the moral forces governing our lives – and I have acknowledged that many times by giving my characters and even my stories names out of his work [...].⁵

Downward to the Earth came into being as the result of a combination of the author’s fascination with *Heart of Darkness* and his own experiences of travelling around Africa in 1969.⁶ The novel tells of the return of a former colonial official – Edmund Gundersen – to the planet Belzagor. The action takes place in a future time during which people have begun to settle in worlds inhabited by other beings. Like the European colonizers of old, Earthlings have set up enclaves on other planets, imposing their own laws and customs on the (alien) native inhabitants, whom they have exploited and frequently humiliated. However, this pattern of behaviour has been broken, as it were, since – when the action of the novel begins – the people of Earth have renounced their claims to the planet after realizing that the aliens who inhabit it – the elephant-like Nildorors and the human-like Sulidorors – are intelligent beings. Moved by conscience, curiosity and a desire to redeem his guilt, Gundersen returns to the planet after an absence of many years in order to make a pilgrimage to the mist-shrouded north – a place shunned by his companions from Earth.

Conradian associations are visible in the way motifs are handled in both books. Silverberg’s use of top/bottom and light/darkness polarization – together with the corresponding motifs of the jungle, river, earth and mist – has been borrowed from Conrad. Although the meaning of ‘heart’ as the essence of things has been simplified in Silverberg’s novel, its semantic function has been taken over by other elements such as earth, darkness and vertical directions. As in the Conradian original, these have several layers of meaning. ‘Bottom’, for example, may be a geographical direction, a place in the next world, a kind of space in the cosmos or – like the ‘heart of darkness’ in Conrad’s novel – a mark of moral downfall.

Silverberg’s modifications include excessive emphasis on the ‘bottom’ (as far as the top/bottom polarization is concerned), the emergence of an intermediate value which is neutral with regard to both the top/bottom and the light/darkness opposition, the Central Plateau region and the absence of any light/darkness dualism in the final

⁴ Apart from *Downward to the Earth*, his most important works include: *Thorns*, *The Man in the Maze*, *The World Inside* and *Nightfall*.

⁵ J.N. Remy. “Author Spotlight: Robert Silverberg”. *Light Speed Magazine* 2012. Available on the website: <http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/author-spotlight-robert-silverberg-2/> (accessed: 01/05/2015).

⁶ R. Silverberg. “Preface”. In: R. Silverberg. *Downward to the Earth*. New York: An Orb Book, 2012, pp. 11-18.

scene. Indeed, the ending of the novel allows us to see why the 'heart of darkness' motif plays no significant role in Silverberg's novel, which – being a science fiction novel – leads up to a kind of eucatastrophe.⁷ The light brought by Gundersen does not negate darkness, but restricts it, whereas in the ending of Conrad's novella – during Marlow's conversation with Kurtz's fiancée – the polarization is maintained and there is no question of light being victorious.

The changes are even greater at the level of narration, as Silverberg does away with the convention of an indirect narration carried out by two narrators (which builds the frame of the story and at times makes comments on particular situations), with Marlow giving us his retrospections on what happened during one of his voyages. Instead, we have a conventional third-person narrative which is not even always consistent.

Silverberg's style, though natural and at times even poetic, is no match for that of Conrad, as he is unable to create apt comparisons and his metaphors are comic. He successfully uses humour and irony, however, sometimes parodying Conradian scenes. His transformations of certain quotations and scenes are particularly worthy of note, to mention but the rituals of the natives and the 'relocation' to a prehistoric age.

Silverberg's transposition of the characters of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the most successful aspect of his novel. Instead of Conrad's two main characters – the positive Marlow and the negative Kurtz – we have three: Edmund Gundersen, Jeff Kurtz and Cedric Cullen.

Although he is Marlow's counterpart on a structural plane, Gundersen has different personal traits. In an ironic manner, he has been created as a positive character, notwithstanding his negative qualities. He appears to be a naive person who lacks foresight and who does bad things, achieving success only by luck or by chance. Given the nature of his erstwhile misdeeds and the fact that the course of his professional career is reminiscent of that of Conrad's Kurtz, he is in a certain sense the latter. However, the situation is complicated by the existence of the 'real' Kurtz, who, though he has much in common with his prototype (e.g. the corruption of the natives, a propensity for deriving pleasure from the infliction of suffering, a similar physical appearance and an illness which kills him) – unlike Conrad's character – eventually feels remorse and repents of his misdeeds long before his death. Cedric Cullen for his part is the most intelligent and likeable of the three. He is the cause of Gundersen's expedition, it is he who utters the word "horror" and he, too, dies.

Each of these three characters has different traits of Kurtz, but none of them is an integral creation that could be Kurtz's counterpart. Moreover, as Silverberg's Kurtz, Cullen and Gundersen were once friends, the motif of delving more deeply into Kurtz also became more diffuse. It must be said, however, that although the psychological construction of Cedric and "Gundy" is flawless, the same cannot be said of that of Jeff Kurtz, who appears to be composed of certain stereotypes and whose behaviour is erratic and gratuitous.

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien's term for a sudden (albeit plausible) happy ending to a story.

The functions of minor characters such as the tourists, Van Beneker and Seena are also reminiscent of their counterparts in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – the white officials, the Russian and Kurtz's fiancée. Here too, however, we have a reversal of traits, the most conspicuous instance being the contrast between the ghostly, faint-hearted yet virtuous fiancée in Conrad's novella and Silverberg's Seena, who is intelligent, sexually aware and brimming with life.

The greatest number of divergences between Conrad and Silverberg concern transcultural references. Conrad makes references not only to the realities of his times, but also to philosophy, culture, the sciences and the arts (including history). Silverberg for his part does not venture beyond the realities of the United States during the late 1960s, criticizing postcolonialism and consumerism in particular and affirming counterculture.

Both authors also make use of intertextual techniques. In the case of Conrad these are literary references on many levels – from Shakespeare to H.G. Wells – while Silverberg contents himself with a quotation from a poem by Matthew Arnold and allusions to Dante and several lesser authors.

Things are different when it comes to religion and mythology, however. Conrad makes references to Christianity, Buddhism and African pagan beliefs, though the title itself could also be seen as an allusion to Zoroastrianism. In all, however, there are not many allusions to religion in *Heart of Darkness*. Silverberg for his part has placed religion and spiritualism at the centre of his novel, beginning with its title. Christianity is in a certain sense parodied, though not mocked. The religion of the Nildorors is a conglomerate of various metaphysical systems. Certain aspects are shared with Christianity, though the use of hallucinogenic substances brings to mind Indian beliefs, while the belief in reincarnation is reminiscent of Buddhism. Interestingly, in neither book is there any suggestion that God exists, despite the fact that in *Downward to the Earth* the afterlife is a matter of knowledge – not faith – as only a human messiah exists.

As far as mythology is concerned, Conrad makes allusions to the beliefs of Ancient Rome, while in Silverberg's science fiction novel – straddling the borderline between fantasy and mythology – we have an interesting and well-written account of a quest with metamorphoses. Although a pilgrimage is to be found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, none of the characters undergoes a physical transformation.

Fantastic elements are to be found in both novels. Conrad's novella contains oneiric and surrealistic elements as well as numerous allusions to science fiction novels. Certain scenes are presented in the conventions of fairy tales or horror fiction. Silverberg's relationship with speculative fiction is somewhat ambiguous. Although the existence of another planet, alien beings and certain scientific inventions would seem to suggest that *Downward to the Earth* belongs to the genre of science fiction, numerous references to mythology, religion and magic rituals – coupled with a curtailed science element – bring the novel closer to the realm of fantasy, where the key question is the presence of others and otherness. In this context, it is not only the Nildorors and Sulidorors who are alien to Earthlings and vice versa, but also the planet on which they live.

As we have seen, apart from certain shifts such as, for example, a modification of the function or personal traits of a character, a shift away from structure or the addition of certain elements, Silverberg mainly uses two transtextual techniques with regard to the Conradian original: intertextuality – when he paraphrases quotations or makes allusions to Conradian scenes in a broader sense – and transformation, on which the whole work is based.

It is difficult to make an unequivocal judgment as to whether *Downward to the Earth* is a parody, a travesty or a transposition.⁸ The parodying of religion, the casting of the protagonist as a morally defective failure who is given the role of ‘God’ – together with numerous elements of humour and irony – all bring the novel close to travesty. On the other hand, there would seem to be no clear message implied by the game which the author plays with conventions. Cullen is condemned for no reason. Despite his numerous sins, Gundersen is reborn as a higher being. The metaphysical system of the Nildorors is devoid of any profound meaning. Nothing is explained at the end of the novel, where the author hints at its ludic nature. If this were indeed so, then the novel would have to be classified as a parody. The third possibility – transposition – would also be plausible, but only if the author had used the aforementioned techniques without being fully aware of what he was doing. However, if we are familiar with other novels written by Silverberg, we can say that despite his frequent use of techniques and conventions which are characteristic of popular literature and given the fact that – being a graduate in comparative literature and a reader of ‘high’ literature – he openly acknowledges his debt to certain literary masterpieces, *Downward to the Earth* has not been written in a haphazard fashion.

I myself would venture the opinion that Silverberg's novel is a *transposition with elements of parody*. As an author, Conrad has been given the serious consideration and appreciation that he deserves and the allusions to *Heart of Darkness* are not merely elements of a game played with convention. In *Downward to the Earth*, however – apart from shortcomings and oversimplifications resulting from the nature of the genre or being oversights on the part of the author (e.g. banal metaphors or misplaced humour) – certain transformations have been deliberately made in order to highlight particular behaviour and particular scenes or in order to poke fun at particular systems. This is a kind of ‘fan fiction’ of the ‘alternative history’ variety, as it provides an answer to a question which is often posed by lovers of cultural texts: “What if ... ?” Writing before the advent of the internet – when fan fiction was still not a widespread phenomenon – Silverberg answers several such questions: What if Kurtz and “Marlow” had known each other and had been friends long before the ex-

⁸ I am using Gérard Genette's typology as laid out in his *Palimpsests*, according to which hypertextual techniques can be classified with regard to relationship (transformation or imitation) or mode (ludic, satirical or serious). There may therefore exist phenomena such as parody (transformation in a ludic mode), travesty (transformation in a satirical mode), transposition (transformation in a serious mode), pastiche (imitation in a ludic mode), ‘charge’ (imitation in a satirical mode) and forgery (imitation in a serious mode). Cf. G. Genette. “Palimpsesty. Literatura drugiego stopnia”. Transl. A. Milecki. In: *Współczesna teoria badań literackich za granicą. Antologia*. Ed. H. Markiewicz. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1992, vol. 4, p. 317.

pedition undertaken by the protagonist?⁹ What if Marlow was a bad character and Kurtz repented? What if the fiancée was cunning and dissolute? What if Conrad had decided to portray his characters in the afterlife? What if dead ivory could be replaced by living, intelligent beings? And, lastly, what if the story had a happy ending?

In one of his own commentaries to the novel, Silverberg says that his motivation for adapting Conrad's novella was to thank Conrad for his inspiration and also to make people see what is really important and what, by means of appealing to the imagination – and especially to that kind of imagination which not only encompasses known phenomena, but also modifies them – can be seen, heard and felt in the represented world.¹⁰

What is a little disconcerting, however, is that the worth of Silverberg's novel would be considerably diminished were it not supported by the Conradian original, even though it touches on significant questions such as transcendence, spiritual initiation, contacts between aliens and human beings, colonialism on a cosmic scale and otherness. However, taken alone and treated seriously as a tale of Gundersen's religious initiation, it becomes a conventional story marred by serious logical flaws – and this is its basic weakness.

The example of Silverberg's *Downward to the Earth* shows that Conrad's masterpiece is irreplaceable, as even such a sci-fi adaptation is quite incapable of eclipsing the original, though it can augment it with newer contexts that are more relevant to the modern reader. Silverberg's novel also testifies to the wealth of possible interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* and can be seen as an example to follow. Although it is really thanks to Conrad that *Downward to the Earth* is seen as a successful work of popular literature, Silverberg's transformation means that Mr. Kurtz lives on – and with him every element of the novel's represented world, weird and monstrous as it sometimes is.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

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⁹ Gundersen is not Marlow, hence the inverted commas.

¹⁰ R. Silverberg. "Preface", pp. 11-18.

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